Our Haughty Poets

By NEWTON ARVIN*

AMERICAN poetry of the last ten or fifteen years can be seen in a just perspective only if certain non-literary circumstances are remembered, and especially the circumstance that virtually all the poets in question, as indeed all American poets from the beginning, have been sons and daughters of the middle class. Their fathers, in fact, have mostly been physicians and newspaper men, Protestant parsons or civil servants, teachers or middlingly well-to-do business men, and not landed gentry, needless to say, on the one hand, or factory workers on the other. They are the heirs, in short, of generations of middle-class culture, and their poetry is an expression of that heritage as it has been modified by time and by events.

There is no great novelty in saying that the soul of middle-class culture has been a certain conception of personal independence, and that this has flowered in various forms—some exquisite, some noxious, some magnificent and some narcotic—of individualism. This is the strain in the older American poets that long seemed most vital to younger writers—the strain represented by Emerson, for example, when he said that God, in giving Saadi the lyre, "straitly charged him, 'Sit aloof' "; or by Whitman when he decided that *Leaves of Grass* should open with the line, "One's-self I sing, a simple separate person"; or by Emily Dickinson when she wrote:

> The soul selects her own society,
> Then shuts the door.

The overtones of these three passages are by no means identical, and individualism is a protean thing; but so far as most contemporary poets are concerned it still means a kind of aloofness, a kind of preoccupation with the self and a kind of refined exclusiveness. Arthur Davison Ficke was speaking for others as well as himself when he wrote to the editors of a radical magazine: "To me, the heart of literature is in those simple enigmas of courage and love and death which are absolutely individual, which have nothing to do with the social revolution, and which are entirely unaffected by any changes in the external world-order. * * * All honest artists * * * are, and must always be, lonely, unsocial and slightly contemptuous spiritual aristocrats." Far as this may seem from rugged individualism, there is a real, if obscure, connection between them; and Archibald MacLeish was expressing a similar thought when he said, in a poem addressed to "the Social Muse," that poets must never take sides in political or social contentions:

> They must sleep with
> Stragglers from either prince and of both views:
> The rules permit them to further the
> business of neither.

No doubt this would have seemed outlandish doctrine to Aeschylus or Dante, or even to such a middle-class poet as Milton; but we are not concerned here

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with Greek or medieval or early Protestant poetry, but with American poetry since the war. The writers of this poetry have not seemed either to themselves or to their compatriots to be very representative of ordinary American life, but they and their compatriots have united, nevertheless, in a common conviction that they are simple separate persons, in a common belief in the absolute rights of the individual and a common distrust of any form of collectivism.

Beyond this point, to be sure, the individualism of the poet will take very different forms from that of the practical enterpriser, and there will not seem to be a close parallel between them. Literary individualism, at any rate, may perhaps usefully be said to have two poles, a positive and a negative. At the one pole it means an absorption in personal and especially in inner experience; at the other it means a contempt for the "crowd," a paralysis of the desire to communicate with others, and an indifference to the possibility of being widely intelligible. To speak first of the negative side, it was partly by expressing this high scorn for the multitude that Ezra Pound ushered in the new poetic era some twenty-five years ago, and his vituperations have been echoed by more than one of his juniors. The late Mrs. Elinor Wylie may be allowed to speak for many of them:

> Avoid the reeking herd,
> Shun the polluted flock,
> Live like that stoic bird,
> The eagle of the rock.
>
> The huddled warmth of crowds
> Begets and fosters hate;
> He keeps, above the clouds,
> His cliff inviolate.

Mrs. Wylie's chilly aloofness, to be sure, is but one variant on the theme, and other variants would have to be described in a thoroughgoing summary: Edwin Arlington Robinson's ironic strictures on democracy in *Dionysus in Doubt,* Miss Edna Millay's neo-Bohemian disdain for the Philistines, Robinson Jeffers's fierce misanthropy—but the list is too long to be protracted here.

What is more important in modern poetry, however, than explicit contempt for the multitude is the kind of apparent indifference implied by a manner of writing—a manner calculated to limit the poet's audience to a handful of highly selected and specialized readers. "Obscurity" is perhaps a tiresome word to iterate in this connection, but the thing behind the word can hardly be passed over. One need not argue that poetry should be a matter of monosyllables in order to be struck by the often formidable and sometimes insuperable difficulties in a typical volume of contemporary verse. It is the result, needless to say, partly of the attempt to express increasingly tenuous and exceptional experiences, but also of the determination to express these rarities through images, allusions and even typographical arrangements that will carry a freightage of connotation only to the poet himself and a few of his fellow-spirits.

American poetry in the last decades would not, in general, be what it is if it were not for the influence of French Symbolism, and it was a leader of the Symbolists, Stéphane Mallarmé, who said that a poem is "a mystery of which the reader must look for the key"; it was another Symbolist, Remy de Gourmont, who said: "Personal art—which is the only art—is always very nearly incomprehensible. Once understood, it ceases to be pure art, and becomes a motive for new artistic expressions." In short, there is something of the enigma in every "pure" poem, and the reader's rôle is rather that of detective than that of fellow.

Such is the highly individualistic

background for the marvels of expression which many modern poems must be recognized to be—marvels of expression, however abortive as communications. Ezra Pound is a prodigally gifted writer, but his *Draft of XXX Cantos* will be full of meaning only to a reader who knows something like as much Greek, as much Latin, as much Old French, as much Provençal, as much Italian, and so forth, as Mr. Pound knows; and even to such a reader it seems likely that the obscurely personal transitions from image to image, from one point of reference to another, would prove a barrier. On a different level, E. E. Cummings is master of an exuberant rhetoric, but his readers must often look long for the "key" to the mysteries of his divorced parentheses, his anagrammatic spelling, his unemployed adverbs and his vagrant capitals. He is a born rhetorician with a fear of being vulgarly understood. He is by no means unique.

All this on the negative side. More positively, a hallmark of the great bulk of recent poetry is its acute and unprecedented introspectiveness. The converse of the modern poet's contempt for the multitude, or his indifference to it, is his absorbing interest in himself, or in other selves regarded as similar units; if he cares little about being understood by men in general, he aims at a degree of self-understanding that Socrates could hardly have contemplated. In kind, this self-consciousness is no new thing; it was first awakened in the Renascence, and has colored English poetry since Sir Thomas Wyatt; it reached a kind of climax, however, in the romantic movement a hundred years and more ago, and has borne some of the earmarks of decadence ever since. In late years, it has been feverishly stimulated by the development of modern psychology, especially of abnormal psychology and psychoanalysis.

A clinical odor, as a result, hovers over a good deal of contemporary poetry, and more than one American poet has something of the air of a psychiatrist confronted by a patient. E. A. Robinson's long narrative poems are really a form of literary diagnosis, searching, insinuating, and hypersubtle; William Ellery Leonard's *Two Lives* is a detailed and minute account of a tragic experience that might be called a sublimated case-history; and T. S. Eliot's "Portrait of a Lady" indicated how far he might have gone in that direction if he had chosen to.

With these three poets psychological curiosity is at least in part objectified; with most of their contemporaries, it is almost wholly introverted. In reading them, one has the strong impression of overhearing a soliloquy, or even, by some mysterious dictaphonic process, of listening to one of those "interior monologues" of which modern fiction, too, has made so much. It is hardly possible to exaggerate either the refinement with which some of these poets have succeeded in expressing almost inexpressible moments of psychic life, or the effect of claustral seclusion which they produce. To read some of the women poets, for example—Miss Edna Millay, Miss Louise Bogan, Miss Léonie Adams, "H. D." (Hilda Doolittle)—is to marvel at the skill with which the faintest eddies in the stream of consciousness are captured and recorded; but it is also to feel like an intruder in a realm of which essential solitude is the presiding deity. Nothing could exceed the ghostliness with which, when they appear at all, the world of objects and the human race appear in these conventual precincts.

The poet in whose work these centripetal tendencies are most interestingly pronounced is probably Conrad Aiken, a writer who has declared that the endless exploration of consciousness, without a basis in positive beliefs or an outlet in action, is a sufficient justification for living. The centre of his work seems to be the fact of solipsism—the impossibility of which some metaphysicians speak—of escaping from the prison of the ego and assuring one's self that other men and the world of things do certainly exist. At any rate, Mr. Aiken has written a series of remarkable poems of which the recurring themes are the mysteries of personal identity, the chaotic disunity of the inner life, the paranoiac vagaries of the ego and the dream-like instability of the external world. In one of these poems, *The Pilgrimage of Festus,* the soliloquizing protagonist breaks out into words that may serve as an epigraph not only to Mr. Aiken's work, but to that of many of his contemporaries:

> Ah, Festus, Festus, Festus,
> How always about you, greater than the world you dream of,
> Rises immortally beyond you your own self's wall!

To be imprisoned as closely as this in the cell of the ego is to have at best a wavering belief in other realities; and, partly on account of its exaggerated subjectiveness, partly for other reasons, contemporary poetry is again and again the voice of a profound skepticism that passes over into various forms of pessimistic negation. Skepticism of a certain sort, of course, may be essentially positive and quite consistent with an affirmative outlook; but not the lonely skepticism behind so much modern poetry, as two lines in Wallace Stevens's "Palace of the Babies" conveniently indicate:

> The walker in the moonlight walked alone,
> And in his heart his disbelief lay cold.

The disbelief behind modern poetry is not a healthy distrust of vulgar delusions, but a cold incapacity for hearty belief in anything; a pernicious anemia of the power to form convictions; a dry sense of the futility not only of action but even of feeling and thought; an obsession with drought and sterility; and sometimes a pathological denial of all value in human existence. It is by no means confined to the younger writers who have appeared in the period since the war, nor can it be attributed mainly to that event. E. A. Robinson's preoccupation with failure, Robert Frost's philosophy of evasion ("Me for the hills where I don't have to choose"), Carl Sandburg's hatred of time and change —these things have roots too deep to be described in terms of "post-war neurosis."

It is true, however, that the poems in which these negations are most completely expressed have mainly appeared during the last ten or fifteen years. The poet whose work gives voice with finest eloquence to the mood of senile weariness, of disgust for the world as it is, of self-torturing contempt for one's own aspirations, is certainly T. S. Eliot in his first phase. His early short poems, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "Mélange Adultère de Tout," "Gerontion" and others, are utterances of the most unmitigated ennui. "Here I am," he wrote, in the familiar opening lines of "Gerontion":

> Here I am, an old man in a dry month,
> Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.

But these poems were overshadowed in 1922 by the appearance of an extraordinary long poem, *The Waste Land,* in which the sense of spiritual sterility that oppressed an age received its classic statement in verse. The symbolism of the poem, in fact,

it need hardly be said now, is mainly drawn from the legend, associated with the Arthurian cycles but more primitively derived, of a Fisher King who is mysteriously stricken with impotence, and who, in his strange stupor, throws such a baneful spell over his whole land that it lies waste and waterless about him. The spell which, in its turn, this epic of debility threw over a generation of younger poets is hardly to be exaggerated. Among the poems which owed much to its example a characteristic specimen is Mr. MacLeish's somewhat romantically ironic *Hamlet of A. MacLeish.*

Disgust is the unifying emotion behind all these poems, a shuddering repulsion at least from modern life; and disgust is the chief emotion behind the work of Robinson Jeffers, a very different writer. Here the repulsion, though no doubt originally an attitude toward modern life—"Civilization," he says, "is a transient sickness"—has become an attitude toward human life in general. In a series of sometimes powerful, sometimes paroxysmal narratives, *Tamar, Cawdor, Thurso's Landing* and others, Robinson Jeffers has represented human beings engaged in the most deadly forms of mutual destruction and self-violation; but, unlike the Greek tragic poets to whom he is indebted, he appeals to no positive values in personality; on the contrary, he denies that human life can be anything but an irredeemable corruption:

> Humanity is needless.
> I said, "Humanity is the start of the race, the gate to break away from, the coal to kindle,
> The blind mask crying to be slit with eye-holes."

So intense is this aversion to human existence that it becomes, as in Thomas Hardy's poetry, a nostalgia for nothingness. In one of his narratives Jeffers declares that "annihilation is the most beautiful word," and a character in the same poem cries out in anguish: "The thing would be to find out a way of getting *un*born."

Not many contemporary poets are so sweeping in their denials as this, and what used to be called *Weltschmerz* did not set in only with the twentieth century; but the mood was never characteristic of American writers, despite the case of Mark Twain, before the last ten or fifteen years, and during that time most of the landscape of poetry has either been shrouded in a fog of doubt and futility or overcast by a black cloud of dejection. At times it has seemed as if all contemporary poets were at one with a character in a poem by John Crowe Ransom, who concludes a bitter dialogue with the words:

> As well might be
> Beneath ground as above.

At times, I say, this mood has seemed to be universal; actually, it could hardly be either a consistent or a permanent state of affairs. Both the intellect and the lungs rebel against settled fogs, and the most interesting verse of the last half-dozen years or so represents an attempt to get beyond skepticism and self-pity. Not that it is always easy to distinguish between attempts to get beyond these things and attempts to get away from them; of course it is true that a writer may always take refuge from the sterility and the chaos of the present by retreating to some real or imagined past.

A conviction that the past was more fertile and more beautiful than the present is the assumption behind such poems as *The Waste Land* and *XXX Cantos,* but Mr. Eliot and Mr. Pound are not alone in assuming this; E. A. Robinson, for example, seems more at home amid the Arthurian scenery of *Lancelot* and *Tristram* than in the

America of his own time; Amy Lowell was subjectively more at home in Renascence Venice or Georgian England; and "H. D." has confined herself, as regards imagery, allusion and color, to classical Greece. More recently, Mr. MacLeish, in *Conquistador,* a narrative of the conquest of Mexico, has undertaken to evoke the heroic spirit of an age of ruthless action; but here, as in most of these works, one is conscious not so much of the real vitality of the past as of its picturesqueness or its melancholy charm.

Something of the same sort is true even of certain efforts to take refuge in the American past. There was a painful nostalgia in such poems of the late Vachel Lindsay's as "The Virginians Are Coming Again" and the hackneyed "Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight"; and Stephen Vincent Benét's *John Brown's Body* is less an attempt to bring the Civil War poetically into positive and significant relation with the present than an attempt to press the historical materials into the service of poetic romance.

A far more ambitious and more philosophic excursion into American history was made by the late Hart Crane (who committed suicide in 1932) in a long and difficult poem, *The Bridge*—a series of poems, rather, spanning the stream of time that runs between Columbus and the New York subway, and ostensibly unified by the symbol of Brooklyn Bridge with which the series begins and ends; but, honorable as the experiment was, the poem itself leaves an impression of imperfect unity and very imperfect lucidity, and Crane seems not to have found the right key to the American past or the American present.

Behind many of these expeditions into the past lies not only the feeling that the present is ugly and sterile, but the feeling, usually ill defined, that the individual cannot after all exist as an independent atom, that he is not really a simple separate person, and that he must get into relation with something, if only the romance of the past, that will mitigate his sense of fruitless isolation. To some writers the predicament has been even plainer than this, and they have consciously sought to leave chaos behind them by resuscitating some social ideal out of history and making themselves its spokesmen.

Mr. Eliot, an expatriate, announced some time ago that he was a Royalist; and, here in America, a group of poets in the South have repudiated the "progressive" liberalism of the older generation of Southern writers, have rejected at least the individualism of modern economics, and devoted themselves to a program of restoring Southern life, so far as may be, to what it was in the days of the planter aristocracy. Secession would not seem to some of these writers—Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson—too high a price to pay for liberation from Northern industrialism; their attitude toward the national union is suggested by these lines from a poem of Mr. Davidson's:

> Today, Lorena, it is forbidden to be
> A Southerner. One is American now;
> Propounds the pig's conception of the State—
> The constitution of, by, for the pig—
> Meanwhile pushing his trotters well in the trough.

Royalists and Confederates unite in denouncing the individualism of the liberal heritage and in appealing to some traditional principle of social authority. The germs of a Fascist philosophy may be detected in this position, and from somewhere among these groups we may doubtless expect to see a Fascist laureate emerge. Mr. Eliot and some of these other writers, it should be said, have abandoned individualism also to the

extent of embracing religious dogma; and Mr. Eliot's verse since *The Waste Land* has been written from the point of view of an Anglo-Catholic.

At the opposite pole from these poets stand the younger writers, who seem to have in mind the second line of *Leaves of Grass* rather than the first: "Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse"; who are less interested in Whitman's libertarianism than in his gospel of comradeship; who believe that pessimism and misanthropy are not necessary attitudes for the modern mind but symptoms of a disordered social life; who repudiate individualism in the interests of radical collectivism; who wish to express not so much their own private experiences as the experiences and the purposes of a whole class; who insist that it is necessary for writers to take sides in political struggles, and who take sides not in favor of a traditional ideal but of a Socialist ideal that has yet to be realized.

Against writers of this school, against the so-called "proletarian" poets, it is charged that they propose to degrade poetry in the interests of political propaganda. To this it is answered, as for example by Horace Gregory, a young poet, in a recent essay on Shelley, that poetry in the past has often and legitimately been the utterance of civic pride, of patriotic piety, and of political idealism; that, especially before the onset of Symbolism, there was such a thing as prophetic poetry that was by no means merely a "personal art"; and that poets may again be what Shelley called them, "the unacknowledged legislators of the world." Something like this was the position of certain poets even in the decade before the last—of Arturo Giovannitti, for example, the I. W. W. poet, and of Lola Ridge, author of *The Ghetto*—and it is the position of such as Horace Gregory, Norman Macleod, James Rorty, Isidor Schneider, the group of poets of the *Unrest* anthologies, and the four young poets of the anthology, *We Gather Strength,* Edwin Rolfe, Joseph Kalar, S. Funaroff and Herman Spector.

It can hardly be argued that American poetry has played a conspicuous rôle in American life in general during the last generation, and perhaps it is not likely very soon to play such a rôle; but whatever may be its destiny in the immediate future, it seems certain that American poets, no matter what their affiliations, will sit less and less aloof than for a long time they have done or tried to do; that they will be less and less content to be merely personal writers; and that they will again acquire a sense of responsibility to the culture of which they are a part. The days of "shutting the door" are probably over.

Current History in Cartoons

Greater than its creator
—*Birmingham Age-Herald*

An interruption in the trip to the hospital
—*New Haven Evening Register*

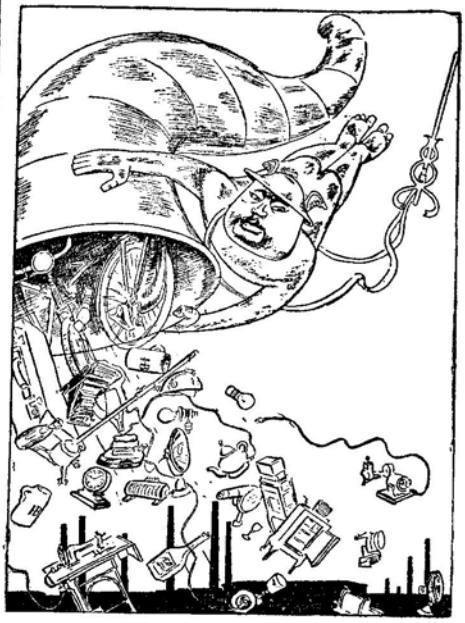
"Have the Stock Exchanges been regulated yet?"
—*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

Let there be light!
—*The Knickerbocker Press,* Albany

Nurse—"Oh, doctor, changing baby's food always upsets him"
—The Detroit News

And look who gets the silver lining
—NEA Service

Worth trying, at least
—Portland (Me.) Press Herald



Japan—"Don't worry about finding work; I'll deliver the goods at half price"

—*Simplicissimus*, Munich

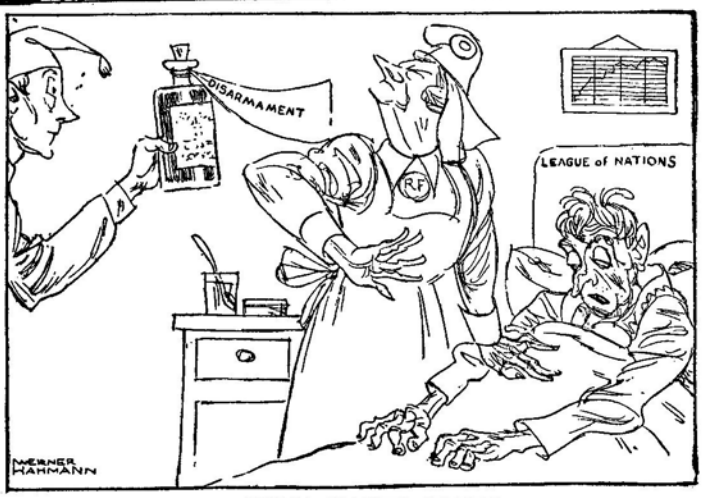
Getting ready for another hop?

—*The Sun*, Baltimore

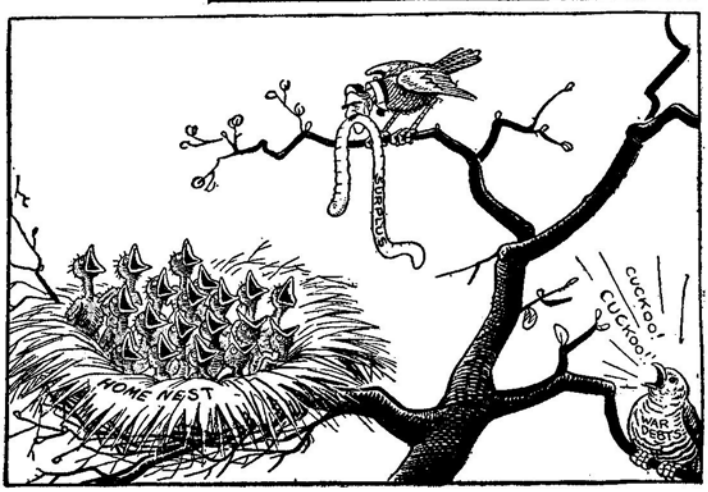
Black (shirt) magic, or the sacrifice

—*Daily Herald*, London

Marianne—"What are you thinking of, Benito? I put the children in the corner, and now you want to take them walking"
—*Kladderadatsch*, Berlin



France refuses to give the patient the only medicine which will cure him
—*Kladderadatsch*, Berlin



Anxious moments in England
—*The Daily Express*, London